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IDEAS

RUSHWORTH M. KIDDER

Are the media really clear on readers' No. 1 right?

First it was the Gannett Company, the nation's largest newspaper chain, buying the respected Des Moines Register for $200 million in January.

Then Time Inc. paid $480 million for Southern Living and a group of other regional magazines in February.

In early March The New Yorker was sold to S. I. Newhouse Jr.'s privately held cable television and newspaper company for $142 million.

Several weeks later the Washington Post picked up a significant interest in Cowles Media, publisher of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, for an undisclosed sum.

And then came the blockbuster: The relatively unknown Capital Cities Communications acquired the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) for $3.5 billion.

By now, the widely reported financial pressures and incentives behind this spate of media mergers are reasonably clear. So, too, are the combinations of money, power, glamour, and personality — that old Hollywood formula for success — that make this such a corker of a news story.

But there is a larger issue here. It has little to do with communications companies as moneymakers or as fathomless subjects for gossip. It centers on the fact that these firms are all, one way or another, involved in what is loosely known as "the public's right to know." The most important question, then, is not who gets rich or who gets fired. It is whether such changes portend a monopolizing of the channels of information that will seriously affect the way we get our news and view our world.

It's not an idle question. Consider the context into which these events have swirled:

- The CIA reportedly drafted a bill for White House consideration that would make the unauthorized disclosure of classified information a crime. The bill, which would impose stiff penalties, was aimed at drying up the press "leaks" that stimulate a fair amount of Washington-based reporting. Last week the bill was dropped.
- In a pretrial ruling in Baltimore, a federal district judge has held that Samuel Loring Morison, a civilian employee of the Navy, is guilty of selling secret intelligence photographs to Jane's Defence Weekly, a British magazine. If he is convicted, the case could set a precedent which, some observers feel, might seriously impair the open public debate of military issues.
- Sen. Jesse Helms (R) of North Carolina and a group known as Fairness in Media are complaining about what they see as a "liberal bias" on CBS television news — and are calling on conservatives to buy shares in CBS in order to "become Dan Rather's boss."

Whatever one's feelings on these subjects, they are not black and white issues. Some news organizations, sadly enough, *do* have biases. The answer, however, is not to drown one bias with its opposite. And some disclosures of classified information, however innocent they appear, *do* damage national security — or help foreign agents identify and assassinate those engaged in intelligence-gathering. But the answer, again, is not to whang the pendulum to the other extreme and give free rein to the self-protecting "stamp-it-all-classified" tendencies of government bureaucracies.

Binding all these different examples together is the slippery phrase, "the right to know." Vague at best, it leaves the major questions (*Whose* right? To know *what? When* to know it? For what reason?) perpetually swinging in limbo.

Hiding under its protection, journalists have intruded upon all sorts of legitimate privacies in ways that raise doubts about whether, in a news-hungry age, real privacy is possible. On the other side, critics can fairly easily make the case that there is no such thing as an abstract "right to know" everything at all times — and that therefore journalists ought to be restricted.

The problem, quite simply, is that this is the wrong issue to debate. What matters is not simply the "right to know" — especially given the deluge of "knowable" information pouring forth from presses and microphones, copying machines and word processers, memos and reports. Far more important is what should be called "the right to understand."

One can make a pretty strong case for such a right. If we are to have intelligent and thoughtful voters — and no democracy can survive without them — they must understand the issues they face. They must not simply *know* about them: Great bunches of knowledge are no substitute for a little understanding. Nor is it essential to know every little detail (which of us can *ever* do that?) in order to grasp the overall design.

What matters — and what finer journalists everywhere are striving for — is the breadth, the perspective, the comprehensive sense that rises above the blizzard of mere facts. As news organizations navigate through these turbulent times, they will best serve themselves by serving one of the public's highest rights — to understand.